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## Baggini, ATHEISM: VERY SHORT INTRODUCTION

Agnaldo Cuoco Portugal

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possibilities. This openness is shown, for example, in the emergent properties of life and mind. But, anticipation as openness to possibilities is simply contingency. It seems Haught's point is simply that the universe has a contingent future. However, Haught seems to want much more conveyed by his notion of anticipation, but what exactly is unclear. For example, much of what Haught suggests has an Aristotelian flavor in each existing thing being drawn to imitate an unmoved mover. This is not the kind of theological explanation to which Haught ascribes. Yet, there seems little in his notion of anticipation that will help him distinguish his conclusions from such an explanation.

One way of understanding Haught's account is as a Plantingian critique of evolutionary naturalism from within a process theological approach. As such this is an interesting synthesis of divergent approaches to natural theology. Whether Haught has moved that critique forward is too complex an issue for me to treat in this review. The problems I have tried to identify in Haught's account stem from difficulties basic to the natural theological enterprise—from where do we obtain our theological concepts, how does our theological language contact our everyday experience. Haught's is an interesting attempt to deal with these difficulties.

*Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*, by Julian Baggini. Oxford University Press, 2004. Pp. 119. US \$9.95 (paperback).

AGNALDO CUOCO PORTUGAL, University of Brasilia, Brazil

It is a short but very provocative book. The aim is to provide atheists with a thought organizer and a handy, quick explanation of their ideas for non-atheists. This ambitious goal of defending a whole worldview in such a short book is pursued in six chapters and a conclusion, in addition to some references and indications for further reading.

The first and the second chapters are the most important. Chapter one is dedicated to a clarification of what atheism is about. Baggini proposes that we overcome the prejudice not only that atheism is evil and threatening, but also that it is essentially a negative position, parasitic on postulations of supernatural/transcendental realities. According to him, there is a positive stance that better characterizes the view he is defending, which he calls 'atheist physicalism' (p. 6). According to atheist physicalism, only the natural world exists, and the stuff of the natural world is essentially physical, which means that spirits, souls, and ideas detached from physical apparatuses are not part of the world. Baggini stresses, however, that this position should not be taken as a form of eliminative materialism, according to which anything that is not physical or material does not exist. Although atheist physicalism postulates that there is only physical matter in the universe, it also claims that out of that sole substance come minds, beauty, love, and 'the full gamut of phenomena that gives richness to human life' (p. 6). In summary, atheism is a form of naturalism and physicalism rather than a negative view dedicated to denying religion.

Chapter two makes a case for atheism in the sense above, claiming that atheist physicalism is better supported by evidence, simpler and more coherent than the religious worldview. For Baggini, 'evidence is stronger if it is available to inspection by more people on repeated occasions; and worse if it is confined to the testimony of a small number of people on limited occasions' (p. 13). According to him, there is strong evidence in favor of atheism while the religious worldview is generally supported only by very weak evidence. For him, natural phenomena are all better explained by naturalism, and things that remain unexplained will probably be explained in naturalistic terms rather than by anything supernatural. In consequence, since naturalism is the best explanation of all observed occurrences, these provide important evidence for atheism (p. 27).

Apart from being supported more by evidence, atheist physicalism is also simpler than the religious worldview, since it postulates the existence of only the natural world. In addition, it is also more coherent, since 'it has everything in the universe fitting into one scheme of being. Those who posit a supernatural realm have to explain how this realm and the natural one interact and co-exist' (p. 30).

Chapter three is dedicated to an outline of atheist ethics, aiming to show not only that morality has nothing to do with God or religion, but also that the atheist may be able to act better morally than the religious believer since he is not tempted to do something only to avoid God's punishment. In addition, there are many examples of important godless moralities, such as Aristotelian ethics, consequentialism, and Kant's moral philosophy. As a result, Baggini maintains, there is no reason why atheists should be thought of as amorалists.

Chapter four talks about meaning and purpose, challenging the thesis that the meaning of life is not a problem for the religious, since God is supposed to have created us with a purpose in mind. For Baggini, this would just make us into a tool for somebody else's purpose, and would not make our lives meaningful for us, since it would not include above all our projects, needs, and desires (p. 63). Moreover, Baggini argues, the atheist who lives this life can see more purpose in it than those who take it as a type of preparation for another one, which would be more meaningful (p. 65). Not only would there be no point in doing anything if we had an eternity to live, but it is possible to see the following dilemma in the notion of after-life: 'either the after-life is recognizably like this life, in which case an eternal one does not look very meaningful; or it is not like this life at all, in which case it doesn't look like the kind of life we could actually live' (p. 70). In sum, for Baggini, life without believing in God or in an after-life is not necessarily meaningless or without direction. Rather, he holds, it is probably the other way round.

In chapter five there is a brief history of atheism, which attempts to show that it is 'part of a progressive story of human culture in which superstition is replaced with rational explanation and in which we lose the illusions of the supernatural realm and come to learn how to live within the natural one' (p. 90). According to Baggini, it all started with pre-Socratic naturalistic theories, which did not postulate anything outside nature itself in order to understand how nature worked (p. 74). Pre-Socratic philosophers inaugurated naturalism by shifting explanation from mythic stories to rational

explanation in natural terms. Since naturalism is what defines atheism, that remarkable feat by the first philosophers allows us to see atheism 'as a part of a wider, progressive story about the development of human intellect and understanding' (p. 78). Although its origins can be traced to pre-Socratic philosophy, atheism only became socially relevant after the eighteenth century, which was certainly a kind of triumph, Baggini says, given the universal diffusion of religion in history and human societies (p. 81). As to the link between atheism and twentieth-century totalitarian regimes, the author denies there is any necessary relationship between them if we take atheism as naturalism. He accuses religious institutions of not having been clearly opposed to those regimes either, and postulates a non-fundamentalist view of atheism. For him, fundamentalism is a danger both in religion and atheism.

Chapter six denies that atheism is necessarily against religion in the sense of being violently hostile to religious activities, which is a kind of fundamentalism. On the other hand, it is certainly against religion in the sense of holding that religious beliefs are generally false (p. 92), a subject already dealt with in chapters one and two. In the end, says Baggini, 'religion will recede not by atheists shouting condemnation, but by the quiet voice of reason slowly making itself heard' (p. 107).

The conclusion of the book starts with the admission that many elements were left out due to the character of a short introduction and the focus on defending atheism instead of attacking religion. Another main purpose was to dispel a distorted image of atheism as sinister and threatening. For Baggini, this image is probably due to the fact that becoming an atheist involves a difficult process of growing up: 'atheism is the throwing off of childish illusions and acceptance that we have to make our own way in this world' (p. 111).

As mentioned above, the book's main thesis is that atheist physicalism is more rationally grounded than the religious view, where 'rationally grounded' is a matter of evidence, coherence and simplicity. The problem of the rationality of faith has been intensely debated in contemporary 'analytic' philosophy of religion. One of the leading participants in this debate is Alvin Plantinga, according to whose philosophy Baggini's position can be characterised as evidentialism in its classic form. According to classic evidentialism, a belief is justified only if it is based on evidence or is basic itself, in the sense of not being based on anything else. Among basic beliefs, according to the classic approach, only self-evident truths (like statements from mathematics and logic), incorrigible beliefs (about our own mental states), or sensorily evident beliefs can be counted. As a result, belief in God would not be basic, since it does not fit in any of these categories. And since natural theology's arguments, which start from basic beliefs, do not work, belief in God is irrational.

According to Plantinga, classic evidentialism faces two serious difficulties. First, it is inconsistent with the rationality criterion it establishes, since its principle is a belief that neither fits in any of the classes of properly basic beliefs nor is based on an argument. Secondly, if classic evidentialism is correct, then many of our common beliefs (such as that other people have minds like ours, that tables and chairs are objects external to our minds or that the world has existed long before we were aware of it)

are not rational. In view of these problems, it would be better to reject the classic evidentialism presupposed by Bagгинi.

The alternative Plantinga provides suggests a much richer landscape than the desert one proposed by atheistic physicalism. In consequence, belief in God, for example, could be basic and thus rational in a wider form of evidentialism. Plantinga's proposal includes a theory of knowledge to counter the objection of being epistemologically and ontologically permissive, that is, of accepting any kind of belief and entity as respectively justified and existent. Plantinga puts forward the concept of warrant as a parameter to judge the epistemic credentials of a certain proposition. In general terms, a belief is warranted if it is produced by a properly functioning apparatus in adequate conditions. In *Warranted Christian Belief*, Plantinga argues not only that the belief in God can be non-trivially rationally justified (i.e., warranted), but also that the same holds for more specific Christian beliefs. Although it is not possible to go into the details of his approach here, and despite the fact that it is also open to criticism—as all interesting philosophical theories are—what we have expounded here seems sufficient to show that Bagгинi's conclusion that religious beliefs are not rational, based on the type of classic evidentialism he defends, is, at the least, arrived at too swiftly.

As to Bagгинi's contention that naturalism is more rational than the religious view because it is simpler than the latter, consider a thesis by Richard Swinburne (*Epistemic Justification* 2001, chap. 4), according to which simplicity has many facets. In other words, what is simple according to one facet can be complex in view of another one. So, naturalism can be simpler than the religious world view (the belief that the objects studied by the natural sciences constitute only one of the dimensions of reality) because it postulates just one type of reality. However, this type of reality will need to have much more complex properties than the ones postulated by the religious view so that 'the full gamut of phenomena that gives richness to human life' may come out of it (p. 6). In addition, the explanation of how a plan of intentions and values may come from a biological, chemical and physical basis is also more complex than the theistic one, which postulates the action of a being whose will is motivated by values.

Bagгинi's thesis that atheistic naturalism is also more coherent than the religious worldview can be questioned as well. According to Plantinga, since natural evolution's mechanisms select better fitted behaviours and these need not be linked to *true* beliefs but to the most useful ones from the point of view of survival and reproduction, atheistic naturalism cannot justify the claim that human cognitive faculties reliably produce true beliefs about the world. So, naturalism cannot justifiably assume that these faculties reliably provide true beliefs, particularly the most theoretical ones, such as the ontological thesis proposed by atheistic physicalism. As a result, atheistic naturalism is not only incoherent, but also self-defeating since it entails an inability to be justified as a true theory.

Apart from most of the main debate in contemporary philosophy of religion, Bagгинi's book leaves out an important reference regarding the meaning of pre-Socratic philosophy to the history of atheism. Werner Jaeger's influential *The Theology of Early Greek Philosophers* shows that the first pre-Socratic philosophers were not naturalists, but the initiators of

the metaphysical tradition and of a more sophisticated conception of God. For the Milesian School, nature was something alive and divine. Although in their alternative to the mythical approach to reality there are some signs of atheist naturalism, they can also be seen as those who first proposed the theistic metaphysical concept of God. The beginning of the rational tradition, far from disposing entirely with the concept of God, was strongly based on it. So, belief in God does not need to be taken as contradictory to the pursuit of scientific discovery. In many cases and for many people, including important scientists in the past and present, it can actually be a meaningful pre-condition.

In short books with ambitious aims, missing points like the ones indicated above are almost inevitable. This flaw is well counter-balanced by a provocative, enjoyable style of presenting the ideas, and a good overview of the main atheistic arguments. In a book of philosophy, an engaging tone is generally an important quality. Like all short introductions, Baggini's book runs the risk of treating its subject superficially. This is not a defect when it assumes its role of being just a starting point for the discussion of a controversial theme. The problem is that atheism is not subjected by him to any questioning in its own right, as if it were immune to numerous criticisms that have been made to it. In other words, it is doubtful whether this kind of introductory text should be designed as a sort of intellectual defence artillery for atheists (or for religious believers). A more neutral approach, dedicated to showing the pros and cons of the debate involving atheism, would be more adequate. Although it is not contrary to the alleged open-mindedness of the atheistic position defended by Baggini, the apologetic approach chosen sounds a little strange, if not naïve, and smacks a bit of advertising in many parts. Considering theoretical debate the main function of a book of philosophy (even a short one), and given the non-fundamentalist perspective adopted by the author, this work should be recommended to the religious believer as a means of fine-tuning his own beliefs in view of other perspectives, rather than as a handbook to help the atheist maintain peace of mind.

*Rethinking Human Nature: A Christian Materialist Alternative to the Soul*, by Kevin J. Corcoran. Baker Academic, 2006. Pp. 152. \$18.99 (paperback).

DAVID VANDER LAAN, Westmont College

*Rethinking Human Nature* is an effort to bring the constitution view of persons to an audience of philosophy and theology students, as well as lay-people who are eager for an intellectual workout. The constitution view, Corcoran argues, is a viable middle ground between dualism and what he calls "nothing-but" materialism, combining in one view the theses that human persons are not merely bodies and that humans are entirely material creatures. Throughout, Corcoran argues that the constitution view is consistent with essential Christian beliefs and that where it parts company with the bulk of the Christian tradition, the tradition's error can be explained and the departure can be defended. As a book that brings a